

Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Lived

Rob Bell

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Preface: Millions of Us

In this section, Bell gives the reasons why he wrote this book. He writes:

I believe that Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. . . . "For God so loved the world." That's why Jesus came. That's his message. [vii]

Interesting that Bell does not finish the quote of John 3:16, or go on through verse 21.

He adds:

There are a growing number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus's story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories Jesus isn't interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with he came to do. [vii-viii]

I've written this book for all those, everywhere, who have heard some version of the Jesus story that caused their pulse rate to rise, their stomach to churn, and their heart to utter those resolute words, "I would never be a part of that." You are not alone. There are millions of us. [viii]

Bell includes himself among these "millions." I assume he's referring to men who reject God being God. They don't want a God who is perfectly holy, just, sovereign, and demands obedience. So we repackage God to fit the sinful whims and sentiments of fallen men.

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. [viii]

These statements are telling. Nothing here but liberalism and humanistic reasoning disguised in Christian dress.

Bell refers to those who "were Christians" but who "can't do it anymore because of questions about these very topics." [ix]

Lastly, from the Preface:

That's the beauty of the historic, orthodox Christian faith. It's a deep, wide, diverse stream that's been flowing for thousands of years, carrying a staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences. [x-xii]

What does he mean by this? Is there truth? Hard truth? Absolute truth? Does the content of the Gospel matter?

Note that the jacket includes endorsements from Greg Boyd and Eugene Patterson. The back cover has a quote (from inside the book?) that is simply a ludicrous statement:

"God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever in Hell." Huh?

And an endorsement by Andy Crouch of the New York Times:

"Rob Bell is a central figure for his generation and for the way that evangelicals are likely to do church in the next twenty years."

I. Chapter One: What About the Flat Tire? (Page 1)

A. Gandhi, Heaven and Hell (story of an art show)

Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling. But not everyone. Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the piece of paper was written: "Reality check: He's in hell." Really? Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know this? [1-2]

This raises questions of epistemology. Does the Bible say that Gandhi is in hell? Can you turn to a chapter and verse that says the words, "Gandhi is in hell." Of course not. Not any more than you could do the same and read that he (or anyone else) is in heaven. The Bible does tell us that unless someone repents and believes the Gospel they will perish. We can assume, with quite a bit of certainty, that Gandhi never did this. Therefore, we can assume, with quite a bit of certainty, that Gandhi is in hell.

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created billions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life?

This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God; it raises questions about the beliefs themselves. Why them? Why you? Why me? Why not him or her or them?

If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection? Being born in the right place, family, or country? Having a youth pastor who "relates better to the kids"? God choosing you instead of others?

What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: What kind of God is that? [2-3]

B. Hope?

A. The death of a H.S. student

Several years ago I heard a woman tell about the funeral of her daughter's friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident. Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian. She said that he told people he was an atheist. This person then said to her, "So there's no hope then." No hope? Is that the Christian message? "No hope"? Is that what Jesus offers the world." Is this the sacred calling of Christians—to announce that there's no hope?" [3-4]

Paul says as much when he writes of the death of a believer, that we who are alive don't grieve of the dead one as the rest who have no hope. (1 Thess. 4:13)

2. Questions? (pages 4-6)

Bell asks questions as to that young man. What about the age of accountability? What if he had died when he was 12? What about babies who are aborted or die before then? What about those who have to say a prayer? Sinner's prayer? Getting saved? What about those who prayed that prayer once, but it means nothing to them today? What about those who never prayed that prayer but live more Christlike lives than those who are Christians?

The questions are of the type that have been asked by the ignorant and skeptics for centuries. This is the result of not allowing God to be completely sovereign. We could ask the same questions about Judas. However, the Bible is clear that God is sovereign and that man is responsible (Acts 4:27-28 comes to mind).

C. Which Jesus, Which Gospel?

Bell doesn't understand the nature of the true Gospel (election, calling, regeneration, justification, sanctification, perseverance, assurance). This is clear when he begs such questions as:

"Is that the message? Is that what life is about? Going somewhere else? . . . then the central message of the Christian faith has very little to do with this life other than getting you what you need for the next one. . . . Is that the best God can do?" [6]

Bell states that this view equates to an abandoning of the world and its needs (starving children, environmental concerns, etc.).

On pages 7-9 Bell asks, 'Which Jesus? The "antiscience, antigay" Jesus? The Jesus who is represented by molesters and murderers?'

D. Salvation by Chance? (9-10)

1. What if the missionary gets a flat tire?

What about those who never heard? Is it all up to chance? What if the missionary gets a flat tire? Someone's eternity is resting in your hands?

E. What do you have to do?

Ends up being about works if one has to "do" anything. "Accepting, confessing, believing—those are things we do." How is that of grace? (Bell asks).

a. Passages Bell cites on pages 10-19

Luke 7; Luke 23; John 3; Luke 20; Matthew 6-7, 10; Luke 19; Mark 2; 1 Cor. 7; Acts 9; Luke 11; Matthew 16; Luke 4; Matthew 8; Mark 1; Luke 7.

Bell contends that only the demons really knew who Jesus was. He paints a picture of biblical confusion regarding Jesus' identity and the content of the Gospel. This ends up being ridiculous, to the point of blatant eisegesis (like 1 Cor. 7) and equating "belief" with "works" (page 11).

II. Chapter Two: Here is the New There (Page 21)

A. Heaven

1. Illustration of a painting

Bell uses as an illustration a painting he remembers from his grandmother's house: a giant cross whereby men and women were walking from earth to heaven with the flames of hell beneath. The painting, he contends, portrays a false image and gave he and his sister the creeps when they were kids.

2. False views of heaven

3. Who will be there?

And then there are those whose lessons about heaven consist primarily of who will be there and who won't be there. And so there's a woman sitting in a church service with tears streaming down her face, as she imagines being reunited with her sister who was killed in a car accident seventeen years ago. The woman sitting next her, however, is realizing that if what the pastor is saying about heaven is true, she will be separated from her mother and father, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends forever, with no chance of any reunion, ever. She in that very same moment has tears streaming down her face too, but they are tears of a different kind.

When she asks the pastor afterward if it's true that, because they aren't Christians none of her family will be there, she's told that she'll be having so much fun worshiping God that it won't matter to her. Which is quite troubling and confusing, because the people she loves the most in the world do matter to her. [25]

4. Matthew 19

Bell cites the Rich Young Ruler passage and in typical fashion misunderstands (and therefore misapplies) the text.

a. Olam and aion

Bell makes the misguided (and common) argument that the biblical words for eternal don't mean eternal, but rather eras or periods of time.

b. On page 44 Bell refers to "the 'Genesis poem' that begins the Bible"

"Jesus wants to free him [i.e. the rich young ruler] to more actively participate in God's good world, but the man isn't up for it." [48]

5. 1 Corinthians 3 misinterpreted to be a type of Protestant Purgatory (page 49-50)

Bell: "Flames in heaven."

III. Chapter Three: Hell (Page 63)

Bell claims that hell isn't talked about very much in the Bible (mostly limited to Jesus and the Gospels). He follows classic liberal thought when he equates suffering and injustice in this life with his belief in hell (pp. 70-71).

Bell follows Pelagian thought in his continued contention that we are so free, and God is so loving, that we can choose whatever we want, heaven or hell.

Many people in our world have only ever heard hell talked about as the place reserved for those who are "out," who don't believe, who haven't "joined the church." Christians talking about people who aren't Christians going to hell when they die because they aren't Christians. People who don't believe the right things.

But in reading all of the passages in which Jesus uses the word "hell," what is so striking is that people believing the right or wrong things isn't his point. He's often not talking about "beliefs" as we think of them—he's talking about anger and lust and indifference. He's talking about the state of his listeners' hearts, about how they conduct themselves, how they interact with their neighbors, about the kind of effect they have on the world,

Jesus did not use hell to try and compel "heathens" and "pagans" to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love. [82]

Sodom and Gomorrah restored?

But this isn't the last we read of Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophet Ezekiel had a series of visions in which God shows him what's coming, including the promise that God will "restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters" and they will "return to what they were before" (chap. 16). Ezekiel says that where there was destruction there will be restoration. [83-84]

Bell equates this with the fact that there is still hope for the wicked on the day of judgment.

As far as the restoration themes commonly found in the O.T.:

The prophets are quick to point out that this isn't just something for "God's people," the "chosen," the "elect." [88]

Sheep and goats:

We see this same impulse in the story Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about sheep and goats being judged and separated. The sheep are sent to one place, while the goats go to another place because of their failure to see Jesus in the hungry and thirsty and naked.

The goats are sent, in the Greek language, to an *aion* of *kolazo*. *Aion*, we know, has several meanings. One is "age" or "period of time"; another refers to intensity of experience. The word *kolazo* is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish. [92]

An an *aion* of *kolazo*. Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean "a period of pruning" or "a time of trimming," or an intense experience of correction. So when we read "eternal punishment," it's important that we don't read categories and concepts into a phrase that aren't there. Jesus isn't talking about forever as we think of forever. Jesus may be talking about something else, which has all sorts of implications for our understandings of what happens after we die . . . [92-93]

Hell?

To summarize, then, we need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us. We need a word that refers to the big, wide terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way. And for that, the word "hell" works quite well. Let's keep it. [93]

IV. Does God Get What He Wants (Page 95)

Bell ignorantly pits God's attributes against one another.

Typical If God is Great then He won't allow people to go to hell; if God is good He can't allow people to go to hell.

Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God *fail* in the end? [98]

On p. 106 Bell cites a question asked by Martin Luther: "Who would doubt God's ability to do that?" (to save all). He pulls this quote out of its context, however. The rest of the quote from the letter:

"No one, however, can prove that God does this. But whether he does give faith or not, it is impossible for anyone to be saved without faith. Otherwise every sermon would be in vain, false and deceptive, since the entire Gospel makes faith necessary." [MSNBC's Martin Bashir on The Paul Edwards Program, <http://www.godandculture.com/blog/msnbc-martin-bashir-on-the-paul-edwards-program>]

Page 107: Bell cites ECFs and church history to support universal salvation (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius.

In their day, Jerome claimed that "most people," Basil said the "mass of men," and Augustine acknowledged that "very many" believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God. [107-08]

V. Dying to Live (Page 121)

The 'salvation' of Eminem.

Resurrection as old as the universe and evident from our skin cells to the leaves and flowers in the fall, winter and spring.

VI. There are Rocks Everywhere (Page 140)

Just as Paul states that the Rock in the wilderness was Christ (and the OT saints didn't know it) so Christ is salvifically everywhere even when men don't know it.

First, we aren't surprised when people stumble upon this mystery, whenever and however that happens. We aren't offended when they don't use the exact language we use, and we aren't surprised when their encounters profoundly affect them, even if they happen way outside the walls of our particular Jesus's gathering.

People come to Jesus in all sorts of ways.

Sometimes people bump into Jesus, they trip on the mystery. they stumble past the word, they drink from the rock, without knowing what or who it was. This happened In the Exodus, and it happens today. The last thing we should do is discourage or disregard an honest, authentic encounter with the living Christ. He is the rock, and there is water for the thirsty there, wherever *there* is.

We are not threatened by this, surprised by this, or offended by this. Sometimes people use his name; other times they don't.

Some people have so much baggage with regard to the name "Jesus" that when they encounter the mystery present in all of creation—grace, peace, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness—the last thing they are inclined to name it is "Jesus."

Second, none of us have cornered the market on Jesus, no none of us ever win.

What we see Jesus doing again and again—In the midst of constant reminders about the seriousness of following him, living like him, and trusting him—is widening the scope and expanse of his saving work. [158-59]

What about John 14:6?

John remembers Jesus saying, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (chap. 14).

This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make.

What he doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him.

And so the passage is exclusive, deeply so, insisting on Jesus alone as the way to God. But it is an exclusivity on the other side on inclusivity.

First, there is exclusivity.

Jesus is the only way. Everybody who doesn't believe in him and follow him in the precise way that is defined by the group doing the defining isn't saved, redeemed, going to heaven, and so on. There is that kind of exclusion. You're either in, or you're going to hell. Two groups.

Then there is inclusivity.

The kind that is open to all religions, the kind that trusts that good people will get in, that there is only one mountain, but it has many paths. This inclusivity assumes that as long as your heart is fine or your actions measure up, you'll be okay.

And then there is an exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity. This kind insists that Jesus is the way, but holds tightly to the assumption that the all-embracing, saving love of this particular Jesus the Christ will of course include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum.

As soon as the door is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying that then Jesus doesn't matter anymore, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn't matter what you believe, and so forth.

Not true. Absolutely, unequivocally, unalterably not true.

What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody.

And then he leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe. [154-55]

VII. The Good News is Better Than That (Page 163)

Bell twists the message of the Prodigal Son.

Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the gospel does, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony.

If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities.

If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately.

If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted, let alone be good.

Loving one moment, vicious the next. Kind and compassionate, only to become cruel and relentless in the blink of an eye.

Does God become somebody totally different the moment you die?

That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can't bear it. No one can.
[173-74]

VIII. The End is Here (194)

Bell revisits his "conversion" when he "invited Jesus into [his] heart" as a child. He invites others to invite the God of love to come into them, as "Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came" and that in the end "love wins."

The entire book is premised upon false arguments based upon . . .

- God's Love - A loving God cannot condemn someone to hell; God's love is so great it wins in the end.
- God's Will - God's will would be frustrated if billions of people end up in hell.
- God's Righteousness - Eternity in Hell is unfair in light of temporal sins.
- God's Sovereignty - If a select few are saved, it's all a matter of luck.
- God's Gospel - The Good News can only be "good" if Christ's death saves everyone.
- God's Kingdom - Eternity wouldn't be perfect if there was suffering in hell.